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DAN SMOOT

PINKVILLE—PART I

All the world has been told, repeatedly and with gory details, that a group of American soldiers sadistically massacred a large number of South Vietnamese civilians at My Lai in Pinkville on March 16, 1968. The civilians were said to be unarmed women and children and a few hapless old men. The number generally reported is 109; but some "witnesses" put the number slaughtered as high as 600.[1] It has been widely asserted that this is merely one incident, typical of many such senseless killing orgies indulged in, with satanic glee, by American troops in South Vietnam.

The reported details are horrifying. It was said that one Negro American murdered a little boy standing a few feet away, holding up his hands in a piteous, prayerful pyramid of supplication. It is said that a white American captain shot down a small child, without reason or provocation. There have been stories about Americans lining up large groups of unarmed women, children, and old men and then machine-gunning them all to death while they were pleading for mercy.[2]

I do not believe it — any of it; and I will not believe it until I see hard evidence to prove it. To date, there has been no hard evidence, or any *real* evidence at all.

Pinkville is a cluster of villages in Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam, so called by American soldiers because the area is colored pink on U.S. field maps. The central village is Song My. Four of the hamlets surrounding Song My are called My Lai. One of the four (which is called My Lai 4) has been, for a long time, the headquarters and hideout of the 48th Viet Cong battalion.[3]

In fact, the whole area known as Pinkville has been infested with and controlled by Viet Cong for 20 years. Villagers feed, hide, and support the VC, and serve as guerrillas in their ranks. Some of the most dangerous VC guerrillas are women and children. Even when on combat missions, they wear civilian garb which makes them look like all other South Vietnamese. Americans, who cannot tell civilians from Viet Cong, are known for their kindness toward children and old women. Hence,

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the Viet Cong send children and old women to throw hand grenades at the Americans, or to lure them into booby traps and minefields.

The most dangerous of all enemy personnel in South Vietnam are the guerrillas — the Viet Cong. They blend in with, and are often protected by, the general population. The grinning child who runs toward an American soldier babbling a friendly greeting, or the smiling woman who approaches as if to ask a favor, may suddenly stop and throw a hand grenade.[4] Women and children armed with carbines are often in the vanguard of a Viet Cong attack, or on the perimeter of a Viet Cong defensive position. It is therefore impossible for American troops to fight the Viet Cong without killing some women and children.

This condition, prevailing throughout South Vietnam, has been particularly bad in Pinkville.

Various units of the U.S. Americal Division have made many sweeps through the Pinkville area, trying to root out the Viet Cong, whom they could never find. All they ever found were "civilians" — mostly women and children. The Americans have suffered heavy losses in the Pinkville area, a "hellhole" to our troops. Here is how it was, in the words of David Deverick (who is now a civilian but, who, as a buck sergeant, led a platoon of Company D of the Americal Division in many operations, beating the bushes and rice paddies and searching the villages of Pinkville for Viet Cong):

"It was so bad when we went into sweep that I was afraid to get off the helicopter. We carried a mine detector everywhere we moved to pick up the mines. Five out of every six guys wounded or killed was by a booby trap or mine. . . .

"Every time we went into one of the Pinkville hamlets, we would find some old women or children trying to hide something from us. I tell you, it's a mighty strange thing when you get mortared and take heavy caliber machine gun fire from a hamlet that just has old women and children in it. This happened to us all the time. . . .

"There were times when we really wanted to tear into some people when our buddies got hurt, but the officers kept a close watch on us. I know a number of potential incidents when a hothead was going to hurt someone and he was stopped. I've done some of the stopping myself. It's touchy, and the commanding officers and lieutenants are really tough on you when you start to rough someone up."[5]

In March, 1968, the Eleventh Infantry Brigade (of the Americal Division) made plans for an assault against Pinkville, for the primary purpose of destroying the hamlet of My Lai 4 which served as a hiding place for the Viet Cong battalion.

An assault group, called Task Force Barker, was organized for the attack. It was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Barker, and consisted of three companies, designated A, B, and C.

Task Force Barker's attack was ordered for March 16, 1968, at 7:00 a.m., a time of day when (according to intelligence information) noncombatant women and children would be absent from My Lai, because they would be at market in neighboring hamlets. Only Viet Cong were expected to be in the hamlet when it was hit.[6]

At the time and on the date designated, the three-company task force, following preparatory fire by artillery, bombers, and gunships, landed by helicopter on three sides of My Lai 4. Companies A and B landed and established blocking positions north and south of the target area. Company C (Charlie Company), commanded by Captain Ernest L. Medina, landed on the western edge. Medina ordered his first platoon to move in and destroy the cluster of habitations that constituted My Lai 4 hamlet. This platoon, led by First Lieutenant William Laws Calley, Jr., physically entered My Lai and demolished the huts and other buildings that had long sheltered the Viet Cong battalion.

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The operation was completed and Task Force Barker withdrawn from the village at 6:00 p.m. that day. Lieutenant Colonel Barker reported enemy losses as 128 killed.[3]

Having seen VC propaganda leaflets that there was wanton killing of noncombatants during the operation against My Lai, the commander of the Eleventh Infantry Brigade (from which the three-company Task Force Barker was taken) made an investigation. He concluded that approximately 20 noncombatants had been inadvertently killed by the preparatory fire and in crossfire between U.S. and enemy forces during the fight. He made his report to the commanding general of the Americal Division.[3]

Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Barker, commander of the task force at My Lai, was killed in a helicopter accident about a month afterward. Just before his death, Colonel Barker wrote his wife telling about some of the problems of our fighting men in Vietnam. Colonel Barker said:

"We can't tell the VC [Viet Cong] from the civilians. . . . The VC think we're soft-hearted because we've given the kids candy a lot, so they send kids and the old women to throw grenades and lure us into their booby traps."[5]

More than one year after the event (early April, 1969) the first allegation that there had been a "massacre" at My Lai reached the Department of the Army — in the form of a 2000-word mimeographed letter, which had been sent to President Nixon, to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and to several members of Congress.[3]

The letter was written by Ronald Lee Ridenhour, a 23-year-old former soldier who is now a literature student at Claremont College in California. Ridenhour was not in the force that attacked My Lai, but said he pieced his story together from rumors supplied by other soldiers. Ridenhour also tried, in vain, to sell his story, through a literary agent, to several national publications.[7]

Immediately upon receipt of the Ridenhour letter, the Army began an investigation.

News of the investigation leaked to the press on September 5, 1969. The Columbus, Georgia, *Enquirer* first published the story, reporting that First Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., was being held at nearby Ft. Benning, under investigation for alleged multiple murders at My Lai hamlet on March 16, 1968.[7] The news media generally ignored the story.

In October, 1969, Seymour M. Hersh, a free-lance writer in Washington, D.C., heard of the case. Hersh obtained a $1000 grant from the Philip M. Stern Foundation[8] for investigative journalism, and started flying around the country looking for bits of information. Through a syndicating service that he organized (Dispatch News Service), Hersh broke the My Lai story nationally, by selling it to 32 newspapers — for release on November 13, though two papers (*Detroit News* and *Alabama Journal*) published the story on November 12.[7]

For doing the maximum damage to the U.S. armed forces in particular and to the nation in general, Hersh's My Lai "massacre" story was perfectly timed. It made banner headlines all over the world just two days before the communist-directed, anti-American "moratorium" demonstrations in Washington on November 15, 1969. Hersh is closely tied in with the new-left political movement which for years has demonstrated and agitated for a communist victory in Vietnam. He was, for example, a speech writer for Senator Eugene McCarthy last year. He has been associated with Abbie Hoffman and David Dellinger, two pro-communist new-leftists on trial in Chicago for leading the Chicago riots during the Democrat National Convention of 1968.[9]

As soon as the My Lai story broke, commentators of the three television networks concluded that our men were guilty of atrocities, and pronounced sentence of everlasting shame upon the American nation. High officials of government did virtually the same, though in more restrained language. Stanley R. Resor, Secretary of the

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Army, in a statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee on November 26, 1969, said:

"However great may be your dismay and sense of outrage that such a thing could occur in our armed forces, it could be no greater than mine. . . . "

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird said he was "shocked and sick" about the story.[10]

At a press conference on December 8, 1969, President Nixon revealed that he believed there was a massacre by American troops at My Lai. The President said:

"What appears was certainly a massacre, under no circumstances was it justified. As far as this kind of activity is concerned, I believe that it is an isolated incident. Certainly, within this administration, we are doing everything possible to find out whether it was isolated and so far our investigation indicates that it was."

Senator J. W. Fulbright said the My Lai incident "can cause grave concern all over the world . . . about what kind of country we are," and claimed that it "emphasizes in the most dramatic manner the brutalization of our society . . . one of the most important and urgent reasons why we should move to a negotiated settlement of the war."[10]

Fulbright and his kind, who supported all of the policies which dragged us into the Vietnam war, now demand nothing less than total communist victory there, abject American surrender. Such people as Fulbright, quick to condemn Americans for committing atrocities, merely on the basis of gossip and rumor, seem quite indifferent to the tens of thousands of unarmed civilians the communists have deliberately slaughtered in Vietnam, as a matter of policy.

For my part, I feel the same way about the "My Lai massacre" story as I felt about the Green Beret story that preceded it by a few weeks: it is a communist-planned, communist-planted propaganda lie intended to discredit the American armed forces.

NEXT WEEK: More on the Pinkville story.

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FOOTNOTES

(1) Washington *Star*, Nov. 26, 1969; Houston *Chronicle*, Nov. 23, 1969
(2) Houston *Chronicle*, Dec. 10, 1969; Nov. 23, 1969
(3) Statement by Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor, Nov. 26, 1969, to the Senate Armed Services Committee
(4) Dallas *Times Herald*, Dec. 16, 1969, p. A10, Dec. 17, 1969, p. A50; Dallas *Morning News*, Dec. 15, 1969
(5) Dallas *Times Herald*, Dec. 7, 1969, p. A27
(6) New York Times News Service, Dec. 13, 1969
(7) UPI story by H. D. Quigg, distributed Dec. 11, 1969
(8) Mary McGrory column, Washington *Star*, Nov. 25, 1969
(9) *Don Bell Reports*, Dec. 12, 1969
(10) *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1969, p. 1, C10

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